
Craving for home land through reminiscences in Chitra Banerjee

Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart*

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The concept of 'Diaspora' extensively interpreted in the academia over the last two decades historically traces back to the later part of 19th century to refer to the dispersal of Jews in terms of exile (galut) and longing for their return to the homeland. Since then this term has been used variedly. From 1960s to 1970s, the classical meaning of diaspora was termed as the dispersion of Africans, Americans, and Irish. From 1980s onwards, this term was used for 'expatriates', 'expels', 'political refugees', 'alien residents', 'immigrants', 'racial minorities', etc. From the mid 1990s, 'diaspora' stands for the "people who live outside their national territories" (Cohen 9). Uma Parameswaran, a noted Indo-Canadian writer highlights the diasporic consciousness as follows:

The first is nostalgia for the homeland, left behind mingled with fear in strange land.

The second is a phase in which one is so busy in adjusting to the new environment that there is little creative output. The third phase is shaping of diaspora existence by involving themselves in ethno-culture issues. The fourth is when they have arrived and started participating in the larger world of politics and national issues. (305)

There are two common moves to which the diasporic writers represent their writings too. The first one, the ‘the temporal move’ looks back towards the past and attempts to look forward for a future as a result it produces complex themes as nostalgia, alienation, homelessness, rootlessness, cultural displacement and assimilation. The second one termed as the ‘spatial move’ involves in a deterritorialization and a reterritorialization connected towards a journey of an individual. There is both a loss of the native geographical territory accompanied by the gain of a new territory too. It is this binary opposition that has led the immigrants to both sociological and psychological acculturation. Most of them engage themselves in cultural transmission and double identification. As a result they land up as divided selves.

This paper undoubtedly contributes in generating the transitional networks in the contemporary world of fiction. Migration is the phenomenon that has been taking place for millions of years and is an ongoing process all over the world. When an individual can no longer acquire the necessary resources to sustain themselves in their locations, they migrate to a place where the resources are available. In the earlier period, people moved either because of the social and economical condition of the home country or shifted to an alien land as they were attracted by the images of destination with greater socio-economic opportunities. The diaspora Indian is “like a banyan tree, traditional symbol of the Indian way of life. He spreads out its roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, he/she has several homes, and that is the only way he has increasingly come to feel the home in the world” (Parekh 106).

The contributions of Indian women writers through the genre of fiction constitute Indian diaspora literature. Women novelists in the United States who represent the Indian diaspora have

made the native space memorable, culturally rich and significant by their writings. The value and importance of these diasporic individual women writers to their host land though initially has been depicted as outsiders, later within an assimilating attitude these women writers have not only to focus on the diasporic issues of nostalgia, rootlessness, homelessness, cultural displacement but have also attempted positively to solve these issues in their unique literary aesthetics. It is to this agenda that writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Anjana Appachana, Sujata Massey and Indira Ganeshan represent themselves too.

Contrary to all the Indian women diasporic writers Divakaruni reigns supreme in not only experimenting her Indian immigrant's existential problems but has also challenged the issues in asserting her Indian woman to be culturally potential.

The term nostalgia derived from the Greek word *nos* (returning home) and *algia* (pain) refers to the longing for the loss of the familial. The bond to familial people, objects and places which continue to remain the same from the past to till date and when it continues future proves to be a permanent loss for the self. This discontinuity creates an anxiety in the individual. There are two types of nostalgia; they are restorative and reflective nostalgia.

More than depression this nostalgia is being used by the immigrants as a coping strategy.

Immigrants celebrate holidays, conduct religious rituals, speak in their native language, and maintain traditional marriage practices brought from their homeland. They also collectively invest in sustaining that space for the future. This type of nostalgia is called restorative nostalgia. (qtd. in. Miyazawa 59)

The celebration of holidays, performing religious rituals, speaking in the native tongue and performing traditional marriages aids the individuals to create a home space in an immigrant land. Through this restorative nostalgia they try to revive the home culture. One of the customers of Tilo, Lalita Ahuja's wife also shares her past life with her. Her story is very pathetic. She has learnt stitching in Kanpur. One day a friend of her mother informed her about a groom who is at present working as a watchman at the docks. Her mother accepts for the marriage. Lalita does not want to marry that man, but due to economic crisis of her family she accepts to marry. Displacement happens in the life of Lalita in the form of marriage. She is married to an older man whose photograph she sees two days before her wedding and he works as a watchman at the docks and likes to drink. She longs for a child, "A baby to negate it all, tugging at her with its sweetmilk mouth" (MS 16). But her husband does not show love and care towards Lalita. Tilo acts as a mother to all her customers to solve their problems with the help of the spices.

In *Sister of My Heart*, the protagonists Anju and Sudha used to exchange their past childhood happy memories, Sudha reminiscences about her childhood days with Anju. She says to Anju,

"And remember the time when we ate panipuris from a street vendor outside our school and got sick?"

. . . And that delicious jeera water the man gave us afterward to drink. It was well worth our upset stomachs!"... "Remember those make-believe game we used to play? How you always insisted on being the princess!"

"Only because you liked being prince better!" I retort. (SH 139)

Being born in the patriarchal order, male chauvinistic and male dominated society, When Sudha has learned that she is pregnant after three years and she informs Anju through phone,

Anju says, “I’m so delighted I could dance---- remember, the way we used to clasp hands up on the old terrace, and whirl and whirl until everything became a blur of light?” (SH 223). Both joys and sorrows are shared through nostalgic memories.

Tilo tries to help her customers who attempt to re-establish their ties with India, their homeland, with the help of an ancient heritage which they share in common. The spices and their mystery is a unique link which makes them reminiscence about their common part with nostalgia. For example, one of the customers of Tilo, Haroun encounters myriad experiences after coming to America. He reminiscences about his past life in Kashmir to Tilo, where he worked along with his father and grandfather as a boatman on Dal Lake for tourist. One day some rebels pass with machine guns into the street of Srinagar. The fighting started and as a result, slowly tourists stopped coming to the lake. Haroun wanted to leave Kashmir but his grandfather says, “...*Toba, toba*, where will we go, this is the land of our ancestors” (MS 27).

One night some rebels wanted to take the young man under their custody. Haroun’s father has tried to stop them. They killed everyone including his father and grandfather. Tilo applies chandan to relieve the pain of Haroun, he slowly comes out of the bitter memory of the incident through one of the spices which Tilo applies to heal Haroun. A nostalgic reminiscence when retold aids in a psychological healing.

Tilo has invested her knowledge in order to prepare herself and her people for the future. Instead pondering over their memories and of their future, she has ideally visualized her community individually either by healing them or by protecting them from a future harm. This sort of a reflective nostalgic practice in the present for the future proves to be a beginning for the

construction of the ideal society for their people through a gradual transformation which it might bring to them.

Their longing towards their home space has resulted in their landing to a state of alienation. In their attempt to preserve their cultural and ethnic identity, individuals like Haroun even woman like Lalita had to encounter physical violence by the dominant structures. Irrespective of age and gender many have started to question themselves and have attempted to find their own ways of forming new identities.

Through her characters Divakaruni has insisted the need for the enrichment of an individual towards the practices and knowledge of the ancient cultural past which could pave way for the construction of the future vision of their homeland. It is through this new reflective nostalgia which would lead the individuals not only to the future but also create the fresh memories and a new home which they can visualize and above all create a new sense of belonging.

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